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ABSTRACT

It is no longer possible to approach the teaching of foreign cultures with an ethnographic and objectivist perspective that allows students to believe in the absolute value of a given definition of culture. The first goal of foreign language and culture teaching is the acquisition of communicative competence in the broadest sense of this expression. Courses offered in foreign language and culture departments should be oriented toward contrastive and comparative analyis of cultures more than they are currently. These departments should see themselves as devoted to intercultural rather than monocultural study. The presentation that seeks to promote admiration for a foreign culture is as detrimental to cultural understanding as is a negative presentation. Awareness, arrived at through questioning of one's own perception of the other culture, is essential. Students should also be made aware that their own culture has instilled in them patterns of perception. Materials designed broadly, for students of all cultures, should be avoided because they do not aid in explicit cross-cultural comparison. Constant feedback involving the student's native culture supports the process of self-reflection. Application of these principles in one comparative French-American culture course was found to satisfy a previously unexpressed need for a more explicit intercultural approach. (MSE)

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Cultural Understanding Through Cross-Cultural Analysis

Jean-Francois Briere

Since it has earned the right to exist in the foreign language departments of our universities, the teaching of foreign cultures and civilizations has experienced considerable change. It was first, and for a long period of time, the teaching of Civilization with a capital C: the study of the great works, the great men and the great moments of a national history provided a background for the study of literature. A great literature had to come from a great civilization. In a sense, everything came from literature and went back to it. although it has not totally disappeared, this conception of culture as a sort of monument is outmoded today.[1] Starting in the late 1960s and the 1970s, the teaching of foreign cultures conquered its autonomy and, with the rapid expansion of the social sciences, sociolinguistics and semiotics, its perspective has been considerably broadened. The revolt against all forms of cultural imperialism has brought a relativization of the concept of culture and has drawn attention upon the immense problem of relations between cultures. Humanists as well as social scientists have become aware of the subjective and culturally defined nature of any point of view and any discourse on culture, one's own or that of others. They have come to realize that in order to apprehend cultural realities, one could and ought to start thinking about the observer's status and his tools of analysis. Relativism and subjectivism have led to an emphasis on understanding rather than knowledge in the problematics of intercultural relations.

The teaching of foreign cultures in our schools and universities has not yet fully absorbed these new epistemological orientations which, I think, should lead in the future to a profound revision in the way such cultures are taught. It is no longer possible today to approach the teaching of foreign cultures with an ethnographic and objectivist perspective which would allow students to believe in the absolute value of a given definition of culture. Too often, still today, the teacher of a civilization course or the author of a civilization textbook attempts to give students a better knowledge or understanding of the target culture with no explicit reference either to his/her own culture or to the students' culture. The foreign culture is

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isolated as a system which can be described objectively, the teacher or the writer presenting himself as a kind of detached outside observer belonging to no culture in particular. Such a position gives to the interpretation of facts and data the formal appearance of scientific objectivity, the corpus of knowledge appears to be independent from those who transmit it. It conceals the fact that any discourse on a foreign culture is by nature, whether one wants it or not, relative. If an American teacher tells his students "the French attach great importance to their summer vacations," his statement has no meaning except in relation to a non-French point of reference which is his own American culture. The only element of truth conveyed by such a statement has to do with American culture as much as with French culture: it is that Americans see the French as attaching great importance to their summer vacations. The intercultural dimension of the statement remains concealed and students will never become aware that what has been presented to them as an objective description is a subjective vision of reality. In fact, the French do not see themselves as attaching great importance to their summer vacations, they simply see Americans as giving little importance to them. The real problem is not to know if the teaching of foreign cultures must adopt an intercultural approach--it is always the case--but if such an approach must remain implicit, unconscious of itself with all the risks involved, or must become explicit, openly expressed. This is where the concept of cultural understanding comes in.

I believe that the first objective of foreign language and culture teaching is the acquisition of a competence in communication in the broadest sense of this expression. Foreign language departments are departments of intercultural communication. And, in order to break ethnocentrism, intercultural communication implies cultural understanding which I would define broadly as the ability to perceive the other as a cultural subject rather than as a cultural object. Such cultural understanding requires, I think, an explicit intercultural approach. I also believe that the teaching of foreign languages and cultures shares with the Humanities and Social Sciences a second important objective which is at the root of what is called Liberal Arts Education: self-knowledge and an increased awareness of one's own identity as a culturally and socially defined invidivual. And it is

obviously not possible to become aware of one's own identity as a member of a national culture without making contact with foreign cultures. You have to leave the United States intellectually or physically in order to become aware of what it means to be an American. Such an objective is so important that it should stand as sufficient justification for making the study of foreign languages and cultures a requirement in American schools. Cultural understanding also applies to one's own culture. But self-understanding as an essential byproduct of foreign language and culture learning tends to be ignored by teachers. Students must face this reflection on themselves alone. Why not integrate such a movement in the teaching process itself? Why not explicitly recognize that the foreign culture teacher is also a teacher of American cultural consciousness?

For all these reasons, I believe that courses offered in foreign language and culture departments should be oriented, far more than they are now, towards the contrastive and comparative analysis of cultures. Such departments should see themselves as devoted to intercultural rather than monocultural study. The study of a foreign language does not, in itself, automatically offer a way out of ethnocentrism. It is a mistake to believe that contact with a foreign world automatically brings cultural understanding. On the contrary. As Laurence Wylie pointed out about a survey of some junior year abroad programs, "students who were somewhat suspicious of what they were about to experience in France returned francophobes. Those who had been curious and eager about their experience became ardent francophiles. Contact simply deepens the feelings you already have."[2] The role of the foreign culture teacher is precisely to break this chain of which many do not seem to be aware. Teachers of foreign languages have usually chosen their occupation because they love the culture they teach and they naturally feel the need to pass on a positive vision of such culture in order to attract and keep students. As a consequence, the teaching of foreign cultures has an inborn tendency to capitalize on such a vision when students share it, which is often the case. There is a sort of tacit connivance between teacher and students in this matter. Many people do not realize that a presentation of a foreign culture which seeks to promote love and admiration for that culture is as detrimental to cultural understanding as a negative presentation. Awareness,

not love, is essential here and it can only come through a questioning of one's own perception of the other culture. Taboo questions like people's motivations for choosing to teach or to sltudy a particular language should he addressed openly. Students should always be made aware that they do not tackle the study of a foreign culture with a blank mind and that their own culture has instilled in them patterns of perception which are going to orient the way they look at the other. An explicit intercultural approach is all the more essential here particularly because our students frequently know little about the American counterpart of what we teach them about foreign countries; foreign realities remain remote abstractions with which they cannot relate, even on an implicit mode. This is why I am opposed to a pedagogy of language and culture which would not take into account the cultural specificity of students. Courses and books indistinctly designed for foreign students of all countries should be avoided because they make any explicit intercultural approach difficult or impossible. Within the last ten years, some teachers and a small number of authors have introduced an explicit cross-cultural content in their courses or textbooks.[3] In the field of French culture, the pioneer of an explicit intercultural approach is indisputably Laurence Wylie.[4] One of the outstanding qualities of his work is that it never conceals the cross-cultural dimensions of his analysis of France and the French: the relative nature of his viewpoint is always made clear. It is probably no coincidence that such an approach was developed by a man who had not been trained as a teacher of language and literature. Indeed, some major pedagogical problems stem from the fact that textbooks and courses on foreign cultures are generally written and taught by people who had been trained primarily as language teachers. Language teachers tend to extend to the teaching of foreign cultures pedagogical approaches designed for the study of language. Immersion, for example, which cuts the student from all links with his/her native linguistic environment should not be used in the study of a foreign culture, which involves no mimetic learning. On the contrary, a constant feedback involving the student's native culture should be organized and maintained in order to support the process of self-reflection. This has major implications, for example in the way study abroad programs could and should be conceived. Because they are geared mainly towards linguistic

improvement, study abroad programs create situations where the student is cut off from his/her fellow citizens and his/her native culture for long periods of time. This may be an efficient way to improve language fluency. It is certainly not an efficient way to improve cultural understanding. When I see students coming back from abroad, I am always puzzled by the contrast between the progress they have made in their command of the foreign language and the lack of improvement in their knowledge and understanding of the foreign culture. Study abroad programs are still today following an old tradition originally designed for the education of the young aristocrat. Many of our students have not inherited the intellectual curiosity required to make the most of one's freedom abroad. We should help them more than we do. A semester or a year abroad represents a unique opportunity for the field study of a foreign people and its culture. Study abroad programs should be like classes in cultural understanding going on an extended field trip. Such programs should be structured as to induce students to become much more attentive to the foreign environment where they live. Students should work under the guidance of a faculty member from their home institution, with a program of weekly investigations which could include such things as making interviews, field observation of foreign behavior in specific places or situations, taking photographs of things or people one could not find in the United States, attending political meetings, studying street graffiti or foreign drivers' behavior in an accident, going to the theater or the museum not only to applaud plays and admire paintings, but also to discover who goes to the theater or who frequents museums and why. Students would all meet on a regular basis (once a week) with their instructor to discuss the results of their investigations. A constant interaction woiuld thus be maintained between contact with the foreign environment and collective self-reflection about one's own culture.

I have tried to implement some of the principles I have just presented in an undergraduate seminar for seniors which I have taught twice in the department of French at SUNY/Albany since the fall of 1980. This course, entitled "The French and the Americans," was entirely devoted to a cross-cultural study of both nations. The introduction consisted in a self-examination of the reasons for our presence in a department of French.

What is so special about France and the French? Then followed a study of past French-American relations during the last two hundred years and a comparative history of both nations. The next part was devoted to an examination of the mutual influences of French and American cultures on each other in the recent past and today. What is the so-called "Americanization" of France? What is the role of French culture in America? We then turned to an analysis of the view that the French and the Americans have of each other. It started with a study of cultural shock in a French-American context. Students were then encouraged to freely express their own perception of France and the French and to try to explain how it originated. After this, we turned to a study of French accounts on America and the Americans and of American accounts on France and the French. These included traveller's journals, reports, newspaper articles, interviews, polls, cartoons, etc., all of which had been carefully chosen to present a wide range of opinions from the late 18th century until today. Several classes were devoted to analyzing pro-Americanism and anti-Americanism in contemporary France. Students had rarely, if ever, had the opportunity to look at their own country through foreign eyes and for many of them, it was a bit of a shock. This part of the course ended with a study of French myths, cliches and stereotypes of America and vice-versa. The course ended with an attempt at a contrastive analysis of the French and American value systems and of a few selected themes like kinesics, family relations, women, education, the practice of democracy and the way to look at business. Each student had a major assignment to prepare on a topic dealing either with the history of French-American relations (for example: De Gaulle and the United States) or with mutual influences (for instance: American linguistic influences on the French language) or with contrastive analyses (like French and American feminism, French and American unionism, French and American cinema, French and American advertising) or with cross-cultural perception (for example: America seen by Jean-Paul Sartre, France and the French seen by the New York Times, a comparison between how two French magazines, L'Express and Le Nouvel Observateur, portray the United States, the image of America in French children's books, interviews of French people living in the United States, etc.). Some collective work was also carried out: questionnaires were submitted to teenage students in French and

American schools on what they thought of the other people and the other country. A detailed analysis of these questionnaires was done in class. Students had to prepare various exercises such as designing advertising pages for the same product to be sold in France and in the United States. At the final examination participants were expected, among other things, to answer questions such as why do candidates in televised presidential debates always face the audience in the United States and face each other in France, or to explain the cultural causes of specific political misunderstandings between the two nations.

Students' evaluations convinced me that such a course satisfied an unexpressed need for a more explicit intercultural approach. Students were able to put the foreign culture and their own into perspective through a collective research endeavor. This course did not neglect to take into consideration nor did it reject as unqualified the students' view of the foreign culture; it used it as a valid resource. Students discovered that they were themselves part of what was under study in the course. They felt personally involved in it and it is through this personal involvement that progress in cultural understanding became possible. As one student put it in his evaluation: "Now I understand why my French landlord in Grenoble tried to evict me."

NOTES

1. A recent (and excellent) example of such a traditional approach is J. Thoraval, Les grandes étapes de la civilisation française (Paris: Bordas, 1971).

2. Quoted in G. Santoni, Société et culture de la France contemporaine (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981), p. 3.

3. See G. Santoni & J. N. Rey, Quand les Français parlent (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1975).

4. L. Wylie & A. Begue, Les Français (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970).